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Northern Shoshone NR14

HOEBEL]

LAW-WAYS OF COMANCHE INDIANS

141

Cannibalism arising from starvation was a Bannock Creek Shoshone obsession. Shoshone folklore shudderingly retails the activities of the d3o'afits, gigantic cannibal ogres who lived in the Saw Tooth mountains. The fear of actual cannibalism had become a folkloristic anxiety. The possibility of cannibalism is not even mentioned by the Comanches, from whose folklore the d3o'afits had entirely disappeared, though in other respects the mythology of the Shoshone and Comanche are very much alike.

To the northern Shoshone actual cannibalism was a crime to be punished with death. It was believed that the person who had once tasted human flesh suffered an inordinate craving for more. His skin took on a peculiar hue, so that such persons were altogether dangerous and loathsome. One story is told by the Bannock Creek Shoshone of an occasion when they came upon the deserted camp of another Shoshone group in Utah. Suspiciously, because of the appearance of the camp, they waited before entering the place, until one or two men had scouted it. The scouts found decimated cadavers and human bones in the wickiups, and in the largest they found an emaciated "chief" and his wife gnawing human bodies. These were the sole survivors of a devastating famine. When the scouts reported their gruesome news, there was much excitement amongst the outside Shoshones. They quickly agreed that the pair should be dispatched, and arming themselves with stones, they stormed the grass hut, trampling it down and stoning the hapless cannibals to death.

The father of Coyote Droppings became a hermit in his later years, living on the banks of the Snake River below the Raft River junction. The notion developed that he was a cannibal, and people talked and talked about him until they finally worked themselves up to decide, "We had better do away with him. He'll eat us up!" Two men were sent down to assassinate him, which they did. Cannibalism was a quasi-crime.

Combinations of circumstance led the northern Shoshone to consolidation of governmental and legal practices in one field which actually placed them ahead of the Comanches in this respect. They adopted the Plains Indian practice of policing the buffalo hunts in which they engaged. Hazardous invasions of the plains were generally undertaken in the fall of the year after the main seed and nut crops were in. Then the Bannock Creek Shoshones joined with other bands from the vicinity of Ft. Hall, including the Bannocks, to cross the continental divide into the buffalo country (buffalo had become extinct in Idaho about 1840). On occasion, union was joined with the Nez Perce and Flatheads, to increase their defensive power against the Blackfoot or Crow attacks. Military as well as hunting effectiveness was needful for the success of these ventures. To attain this end a small

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The Comanches

776 men are immune to dog medicine—or at least White Wolf was willing
825 to let a white chance it! As they feel thus about dogs, it is hardly surprising that the Comanches will not eat them.

262 Although wild fowl and fish were plentiful, they were not eaten except when food was very scarce, for fish were tabu, and it was common belief that those who ate the turkey would become cowardly and run from their enemies just as the turkey flees from his pursuers. Frogs and swine were also tabu; frogs because, like fish, they were water animals, and swine because they were associated with mud and water. The Comanches, if they knew it, would eat nothing cooked with hog lard.

266 The Comanches did not eat human flesh. The neighboring Tonkawas, whom the Comanches found in Texas, were loathed and detested because of their cannibalistic practices. The fact of cannibalism is the chief rationalization used by the Comanches in explaining their implacable enmity for the Tonkawas. Like many moral excuses for war, this one, too, seems to come after the fact, since prior to the nineteenth century, when the Tonkawas were busy fighting the Apaches, the Comanches got on well enough with them.⁴ It is quite probable that the Comanches themselves were not at all unused to the idea of cannibalism in the early days of their southward migration. That some people will turn cannibal in starvation times is accepted by the Shoshones, although cannibals were reputedly hanged because once having tasted human flesh they acquired an insatiable appetite.⁵ Among the Comanches, however, the very idea that one of them might under stress eat another person was vigorously repulsed.

266 In late winter food sometimes became scarce; neither buffalo, deer, antelope, nor elk could be obtained. The shortages were more likely to occur in February and March, the season designated by a term meaning "when the babies cry for food."⁶ When food became scarce, a Comanche ate almost anything—the tabued fish and fowl, rabbits, terrapins, turtles, snakes, skunks, rats, lizards, grasshoppers, meats which were no longer fresh, roots, and bark.

000 In the preparation of food, meat was generally cooked by holding

⁴ H. E. Bolton, "Tonkawa," in Hodge, *Handbook*, II, 783.

⁵ Hoebel, *The Political Organization and Law-Ways of the Comanche Indians*, Appendix A, 141.

⁶ Informant: Medicine Woman.